

Item No. 4

**Halifax Regional Council
November 18, 2008**

TO: Mayor Kelly and Members of Halifax Regional Council



SUBMITTED BY: _____
Mike Labreque, Director Transportation & Public Works

DATE: October 28, 2008

SUBJECT: **Public Gardens - Earlier Opening/Later Closing and Winter Access**

INFORMATION REPORT

ORIGIN

During March 4, 2008 Regional Council, Councillor Sloane submitted a petition signed by residents of civic number 5881 Spring Garden Road requesting consideration for opening the Public Gardens earlier in the spring and closing later in the fall; as well as, consideration for limited access during the winter months.

BACKGROUND

The Halifax Public Gardens is one of the finest surviving examples of Victorian Gardens in North America. The Gardens began on common land by the Nova Scotia Horticulture Society in 1836. Horticulture Hall was erected in 1847 and served as the meeting room for members of the Society. A second series of gardens were begun by the City of Halifax in 1867, and in 1874 the gardens were unified into the present 16 acres which included a man-made lake known as Griffin's Pond.

The Halifax Public Gardens was recognized as a National Historic Site in 1984. The Public Gardens is a valuable resource in the study of heritage plants and landscape design. It also houses a public collection of garden artifacts such as statues, a bandstand, and fountains which are representative of the Victorian era.

DISCUSSION

At present, the operating/open season of the Public Gardens is from early May (subject to weather conditions) to Remembrance Day. Staff estimate that the Public Gardens currently has over one million visitors a year. As with all eco-systems, there is a limited threshold, or bearing capacity, that if extended would result in negative impacts and degradation. Parks staff will be undertaking an environmental user study to determine the visitor bearing capacity/threshold of the Gardens.

The greatest impact affecting the opening and closing date of the Gardens is the weather. Staff recognize the desire of the public to gain earlier access to the Public Gardens, however, the public should be cognizant of the fact that the Public Gardens has been designated as a National Historic site. Therefore, the municipality must ensure public demand for early access is balanced with sustainable maintenance practices that protect its unique character and environment.

The typical winter for peninsula Halifax is a constraint to completing critical maintenance tasks required before the Public Gardens could be opened to the public. Freeze/thaw cycles during the winter, and wet spring and fall weather, renders the walkway/pathway system unusable to both staff and visitors. These conditions require ample time for proper drainage and drying before parks staff are able to resume maintenance.

Adding to this challenge is a well documented drainage problem. A portion of the Gardens west of Griffin's Pond, was constructed on swamp land that was backfilled with ash and rubble. Also, the portion of the Gardens south of Griffin's Pond and Main Allée is at a lower elevation than the pond and remains wet well into the spring, or becomes wet in the fall due to leaks. Staff is unable to begin spring clean-up or prep work until the soil is sufficiently dry. Soil structure would be easily damaged if walked on, or manipulated too early.

The stone dust walkway/pathway system of the Public Gardens is not conducive to the same winter snow and ice (plowing and salting) treatments that the outside perimeter (concrete) sidewalks receive. However, the newly installed entrance plaza at Horticulture Hall is an area that may provide an opportunity for limited winter access to the public.

Pending staff availability, and favourable winter weather, manual winter maintenance could be conducted at the Horticulture Hall entrance to accommodate limited winter use (restricted to the plaza area). Currently, the majority of parks maintenance staff are reassigned to Winter Works from mid November to mid April; therefore, maintenance would be scheduled as a tier two task. Council and the public would need to be aware that extended winter weather, or back to back weather events, would impact staffs' ability to perform tier two and tier three tasks.

It would also be necessary for Parks staff to closely monitor any winter use of the Public Gardens and continually assess any potential negative impact to the surrounding areas of the Gardens. This limited winter access will be carried out on a trial basis for the 2008/2009 winter works season, with a thorough assessment in the spring of 2009.

BUDGET IMPLICATIONS

Costs would be minimal and would be absorbed in Operating Budget R850.

FINANCIAL MANAGEMENT POLICIES / BUSINESS PLAN

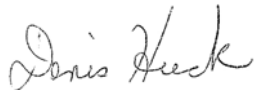
This report complies with the Municipality's Multi-Year Financial Strategy, the approved Operating, Capital and Reserve budgets, policies and procedures regarding withdrawals from the utilization of Capital and Operating reserves, as well as any relevant legislation.

ATTACHMENTS

N / A

A copy of this report can be obtained online at <http://www.halifax.ca/council/agendasc/cagenda.html> then choose the appropriate meeting date, or by contacting the Office of the Municipal Clerk at 490-4210, or Fax 490-4208.

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Report Approved by: _____
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